

THE AUDIENCE VIEW & MEDIA IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

Mass media are the primary provider of information that reaches wide audiences. News and information from mass media are considered stimuli that solicit responses from the public. Mass media have become a critical part of a system of governance, taking advantage of their capacity to transcend almost all barriers that may be linguistic, geographical or economic. Mass media being a properly structured communication system today have acquired the capacity to influence, shape and even alter public opinion on issues of relevance. Mass media have now been accorded a special status at the advent of globalization considering the amount of impact they can make upon the people at large. Therefore, a medium gains considerable degree of respect based on the reliability of information it dishes out to the public (Hungbo, 2007). Here comes the pertinent question of credibility of media which is basically a major content-related challenge. Public trust in the media is always at the core of credibility. Decline of the trust in media by public has become a pressing issue and information being asymmetrical is manipulated by media.

The history of the growth of print media in modern Assam dates back to around 1846's while the private satellite channels started operating in the state only since 2004. In a state like Assam, considering its economic status & educational attainment level of the people, the impact and role of print media are basically confined to a particular section while the influence of private satellite channels is widespread and profound. Recently, some corners have raised voice against both the media for 'creating' somewhat baseless news or 'blowing out' some particular news items which could have easily been avoided to restore trust on media.

This paper based on qualitative analysis makes an attempt to study the reactions of different segments of people about some select news items published in local print media which reflect their level of trustworthiness on media. Some published news items in three Assamese dailies during 2012-16 have been taken into consideration for the present study.

KEYWORDS : Assam, Media & Audience

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INTRODUCTION

Mass media are the primary provider of information that reaches wide audiences. News and information from mass media are considered stimuli that solicit responses from the public. Mass media have become a critical part of a system of governance, taking advantage of their capacity to transcend almost all barriers that may be linguistic, geographical or economic. Mass media, today, being a properly structured communication system have acquired the capacity to influence, shape and even alter public opinion on issues of relevance. Mass media have now been accorded a special status at the advent of globalization considering the amount of impact they can make upon the people at large. Therefore, a medium gains considerable degree of respect based on the reliability of information it dishes out to the public (Hungbo, 2007). Here comes the pertinent question of credibility of media which is basically a major content-related challenge. Public trust in the media is always at the core of credibility. Decline of

the trust in media by public has become a pressing issue and information being asymmetrical is manipulated by media.

Assam is a state of the democratic Republic of India with an area of 78,438sq km having 33 districts, including four districts in Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). It is a state from which six states of the North-East India were carved out at different times from the original territory of Assam at the time of independence. The term 'Assam' here refers to that geographical territory which has been the same since 1972. According to the 2011 Census of India, the population of the state is 3,11,69,272 of which 1,59,54,927 are male and 1,52,14,345 are female. The state is inhabited by many tribes. Some of them are Bodo Kachari, Mishing, Deori, Rabha, Tiwa or Lalung Tribe, Sonowal Kachari, Tai Phake or Phakial, Dimas Kachari, Karbi, Mech etc.

The history of Assamese print media goes back to the year 1846 when *Arunodoi* was published by the American Baptist missionaries with an objective to provide all possible necessary information to the natives in the style of a newsmagazine. Since then, a large number of newspapers, periodicals were published from Assam. *Doordarshan* was introduced in the state on 19th November, 1982. On 16th March, 2004, the first private satellite television news channel, *NeTV* under the banner of Positive Television Pvt. Ltd. was launched in the region. At present, the state has around 50 registered dailies and 7 private satellite channels and many web portals for news.

In recent times in North East India the GS Road molestation incident, the Sheena Bora murder case, Assam Assembly Elections, 2016, border issues between Nagaland and Assam, conflict between Muslims and Bodos in the BTAD area of the state, are some of the incidents which created a major impact on the local civil society. Writing on an article titled 'Judicial activism by media' the writer Arnab Jyoti Das commented that in recent times, it is seen that media of Assam practice media activism or media trials. He also remarked that the media should follow 'accuracy, honesty, truth, objectivity, fairness, balanced reporting and respect or autonomy of ordinary people. The writer wrote, '...the media should come up with the truth, that too at the right time. Although the print media has made itself compliant with legal guidance and ethical limits, the electronic media is still experimental and is relying on the trial and error method for what to show and what not to show' (Das, 2015). In the article 'Television aaru aamar Manashikota' published on 1st to 15th March, 2016 in *Prantik*, Dr. Sunil Pawan Baruah wrote about the ownership of Indian media. He stated that due to political influence among the owners, the media has failed to create public opinion constructively. In the October issue of *Satsori*, 2015 Mriduprasad Nath criticized the role of satellite channels of Assam and stated that they try to destroy the society. He said that satellite channels of Assam intend to exaggerate an issue, while some owners and reporters themselves are corrupt. In August, 2013 issue of the same magazine, the writer criticized the presentation style of electronic media of Assam especially in rape or molestation cases. Saikia (2013) in her write-up 'News channel samohor proti anorudh' requested the television channels of Assam to change the presentation style of the news. Gogoi (2013) in an article wrote that the news that we get from different media is much trusted. But the question is whether the sources or the reporters are credible or not. He said that media is a commodity and due to television rating point (TRP), sometime media neglects important news. He suggested that there should be some selection criteria for the journalists. Regarding the Guwahati Beltola incident which took place on November 24, 2007 where a tribal girl was stripped naked by a group of people during the Tea Tribes protest rally, regional media showed unedited picture or footage of the victim. Pande (2007) made a remark on the statement of The Assam Press Correspondence Union (APCU) and Journalist Federation of Assam (JFA) which says that 'The Assam Press Correspondence Union has appealed to the media to exercise restraint while reporting on the protest programme of the agitating communities. The Journalist Federation of Assam has called upon the media to

remember accountability to the state and place its reports in a controlled manner' (Pande, 2007).

To see the opinion of the common readers and viewers about the media of Assam, a qualitative analysis of three prominent dailies of Assam namely, *Asomiya Pratidin*, *Aamar Asom* and *Dainik Janambhumi* has been done for the period 2012 to 2016. All the news, articles and letters to the editors regarding media's role have been analyzed. The period was taken considering the fact that G.S. Road molestation case was a major incident in the recent past that attracted almost all regional and national media and it was widely believed that the incident was mostly media hype and things were blown out of proportion.

On 9th July, 2012 a teenage girl was molested in the main road of the Guwahati city by a mob outside a bar. The whole half an hour incident was broadcasted live by a local channel of Assam and it became viral nationwide. Regarding the live telecast of the incident, people raised the question whether a satellite channel has the right to broadcast such uncut footages. What is the ethics a media house has regarding news selection? Satellite channels were criticized from all the corners of the country. On 12th July, 2012, the first page of *Dainik Janambhumi* published a write-up with the heading 'Exclusive news and Ethics'. The writer mentioned about the GS road incident and stated that media is now competing for exclusive news and in the competition most of them forget about the ethics of journalism. Shaming humanity the reporter and cameraperson covered the incident on the city road for half an hour. They neither helped the victim nor did they inform the police. He also questioned the Press Council of India about their responsibility regarding this type of journalism.

Meanwhile, on 14th July, 2012 the lead news on the front page of *Aamar Asom* was on the same GS road incident. The report criticized the coverage of such unfortunate incident by almost every national channel of the country for the entire day. The news highlighted Actor Amitabh Bachan's statement, who questioned the immediate presence of the channel during the incident. He also questioned, if they were already aware of the unfortunate incident and why didn't they stop the incident from escalating. In another news, a reporter of a local channel was involved in a similar incident.

On 15th July, 2012 the 1st page of *Aamar Asom* published two news on the GS Road incident. The first news alleged that a journalist of a local satellite channel was involved in that case. The news was based on Social worker and RTI activist, Akhil Gogoi's allegation, who showed videos which proved that a journalist was the main culprit behind the incident. The other news was on the resignation of 8 journalists from the Electronic forum of the state on the controversial GS Road incident.

Regarding the news and the panel discussions broadcasted by the satellite channels of Assam, another editorial which was also published in *Aamar Asom* on 15th July, 2012 with the heading "Subject & Importance of news" (Bixoy aaru batorir gurutto) stated that repeated coverage of bad or negative news can destroy the positive sides of issues. The editorial stated that due to television we are now able to get all the information from every corner of the world. But it is seen that in most of the cases television channels held more discussions on negative news. They even create drama by holding news discussions week after week by inviting panelists. But the editorial advised that there are other issues which media can focus more for the benefit of the younger generation. The editorial also mentioned that being the fourth pillar of democracy, a media should not only concentrate on corruption, illegal social issue etc. rather they should also analyzed the socio-economic issues of the state to create public opinion. While television channels give more time to negative issues, important issues are neglected. Due to media's maximum coverage on negative issues, children are unable to differentiate between good and bad.

On 18th July, 2012, *Aamar Asom*'s editorial published about the lack of follow-up stories. Here, the editorial has stressed on the Beltola incident where an Adivasi girl was molested by some people on the main road of Beltola, Guwahati on November, 2007. It was seen that the incident was reported by almost every media at that time, but later no follow up story or news was seen. The editorial said that the same will happen with the GS road incident. The editorial mentioned that the National media most of the times remain silent about important issues from North East, but they provided full coverage on the GS road molestation case.

On the 1st page of *Aamar Asom* on 18th July, 2012 a news was published where a reporter of a private channel of Assam was arrested in connection with the GS road incident. In the anchor story, the writer wrote that the primetime news of Assamese bulletin should be renamed as corruption news. He mentioned that such type of news coverage is not found anywhere in the world. Media have no time to cover or analyzed the development of the state. He appealed to the government to get rid of the rating system for regional channels and put a stop to the 24x7 news bulletin, as the media is mostly concentrated into negative news.

Regarding the GS Road incident an editorial was published on 19th July, 2012 of *Dainik Janambhumi* stated that electronic media should have some code of conduct regarding the use of certain footages. The editorial stated that news should be regulated by media houses keeping in mind the societal norms. Negative news should be avoided or else media will lose its credibility. It stated that before broadcasting, News channels should be cautious and careful and GS road incident sets the best example of careless journalism.

The lead news of *Dainik Janambhumi* on July 21st, 2012 was the arrest of the journalist of a satellite channel of Assam in connection to the GS road incident. The news stated that the reporter was directly involved in the molestation case.

On 21st July, 2012 in *Dainik Janambhumi* a news was published where Paranjay Guha Thakurta, a senior journalist mentioned about the coverage of GS road incident. While speaking to the media, as a guest of Press Club, Thakurta condemned the role played by the local channels and said that while in such incident, a reporter should first offer help to the victim.

On 18th December, 2012 in *Dainik Janambhumi*, three articles were published among which an article questioned on why media is mostly concentrated into private matter. The writer wrote that the private channels of Assam for TRP brings forward unimportant stories with sensational background music and viewers get an impression that the state has less important stories. On the other hand, the other article questioned when electronic media would come out of the idiot box. The writer stated that no one can say that media is important because media in Assam now telecasts content which creates sensation only for TRP and popularity. The writer said that channels broadcast stories which do not bear news value. The writer also mentioned that it is now a trend that if a reporter dislikes a certain person, the reporter writes negatively about him/her. The author of the article requested that the media should avoid glorification and be responsible for disseminating the truth. In another article, the writer alleged that the Assamese satellite channels destroy the fabric of society because of repeated broadcasting of unsocial issues, suicide, murder, rape, violence, kidnapping etc. He stated that such coverage leads to the increase of unsocial incidents. The writer said that the media is the eyes and ears of the society and media should be accountable for creating awareness to stop such incidents. He also spoke about the usage of language by the anchors and reporters of the Assamese news channels. The writer also wrote that due to the increase of advertisement, less space is given to news in Assamese newspapers.

On 7th January, 2013, *Asomiya Pratidin* published an article after the NDFB's operation in Biswanath Chariali. He alleged that media is indirectly responsible for the aftermath of the incident and more coverage would lead to community conflict.

On January 12, 2014 a letter to editor was published in *Aamar Asom* where the writer said that although the number of television channels has increased in the state but the print media have not lost its importance in the society. He further said that news channels should have a special segment where viewers can give their feedback. Besides he also mentioned that the reporters and anchors of satellite channels of Assam use the Assamese language improperly.

On 15th September, 2014 in *Aamar Asom*, in an article, the writer also compared between print and electronic media by saying that if print media publishes wrong news, they can clarify it in the next issue.

On 26th March, 2015 an article was published in *Asomiya Pratidin* where the writer wrote that though the number of news channels has increased in the state but in comparison to print media electronic media is not matured. He expects that news satellite channels of the state would be accountable.

On 23rd March, 2015 in *Asomiya Pratidin* there was an article where the writer mentioned that the credibility of electronic media is less. He mentioned that the Doordarshan provided the truth whereas private channels telecast news for competition. During the launch of *Pratidin Time*, he requested the new satellite channel to collect accurate news. His expectation from the channel was to create public opinion by giving unbiased and healthy news.

In regard to the same satellite channel another article was published in 12th June, 2015 in *Asomiya Pratidin* where the writer alleged that now a day the channels are busy with TRP. He wished that the channel will start a new way of presenting news.

On 16th July, 2015's *Dainik Janambhumi*, in a letter to the editor, a writer stated about the role of reporter in some private issues. He mentioned about violation of privacy by media on the second marriage case of Dr Rumi Nath, the then MLA of Borkhola constituency. He alleged that the electronic media and a couple of newspapers in Assam exaggerated the second marriage issue. He further stated that the same journalist would not have reported or showed videos, if the same had happened with one of his family member.

Regarding privacy, there is another content from 18th August, 2015 in *Dainik Janambhumi*, where the writer said that television channels of Assam were busy in broadcasting the sensational videos which creates negative impact on the youth. She questioned that by broadcasting these videos do they actually increase their TRP. She abbreviated TRP as 'The Real Purpose' of the channel. She mentioned about the two murder cases, one which is a National sensation, the Sheena Bora murder case and the other one is of Sweety Baruah (a young actor of Assam)'s murder case. In both the cases the television channels of Assam focused more on their personal lives. Channels were investigating the affairs of Indrani Mukharjee, the mother of Sheena Bora who was accused of killing her daughter more than investigating the murder mystery itself.

On 27th August, 2015, an article of *Aamar Asom* questioned the role of print media in Assam. He wrote as the number of newspapers increased, the competition has also increased. Increase of electronic media is another challenge for their survival. So in most of the cases the same incident is reported differently by newspapers which creates confusion among the readers. He gave an example of the news covered by two different newspapers on the death of Ex President of India, Dr A. P. J. Abdul Kalam. He analysed both the newspapers and found different facts about the person.

On 6th September, 2015 an article was published in the editorial page of *Aamar Asom* regarding Media's responsibility. The writer wrote about the credibility of media. He said that during late 60's media played the role of king maker. He wrote that media of Assam is losing trust in the last decade. He gave two reasons; one is the increase of electronic media and stated that the second reason was the fact of politicians being the owner of media houses. Moreover for TRP, houses make news instead of breaking news. On the other hand the owners use media for promoting themselves. He said that now he doesn't expect media to give truth and neutral news. He also said that people should aware of accurate news information.

On September 7, 2015 in the first page of the *Aamar Asom* a columnist wrote that Lord Macle who gave media the status of 4th pillar of democracy in 1828, if alive today, he himself wouldn't have considered media as a democratic system. He wrote that in comparison to electronic media, print media still maintain their status. He gave example of some Assamese television journalist who demands money from different section of people, due to which television channels have lost their credibility. Most of the Assamese channels were owned by political leaders. He also stated that there is lack of trained journalist. He also mentioned that the television channels gave the verdict of the Sheena Bora murder case before the actual judgment. He mentioned that the media practices media trial.

In 10th September, 2015 *Aamar Asom* an article was published where the writer said that some news channels of Assam broadcasted biased news. They did not provide objective, neutral news.

On 14th September, 2015 in *Aamar Asom* three articles were published. In the first article the writer wrote that media loses its credibility leading to the rise of alternate media. He said that it is seen that Doordarshan, Rajya Sabha TV, Radio, community radio has become popular. The second article wrote about TRP centric issues. The writer mentioned about the launching of a new satellite channel of Assam. He said that the channel is headed by a person (he is the Former Editor of another channel) who wrote a book on TRP. The book contained about the manipulation of TRP. The writer quoted some pages of the book where the editor writes his experience of TRP while working in the previous channel. The writer stated that corporate structure is the factor for media's distrust. He mentioned TRP as a part of hegemonic democracy in journalism. The third article is also about television journalism and TRP. The writer wrote that channels are an important part of our society because through it we get all the necessary information. But he expected good news and constructive discussions from the media. He also said that the programmes or the channels which are not good, gain the most TRP. He also stated that like film, story etc. channels were not criticized constructively in Assam. If constructive criticism or the role of the channels is not written the channels do whatever they want. So according to him media criticism is important.

In the 22nd September, 2015's *Aamar Asom* an article was published. The writer emotionally wrote that if a person dies unnaturally, the television channel's repetitive coverage deepens the wound. He mentioned this in regard to Sweetie Baruah's death.

On 24th September, 2015 in *Aamar Asom* four articles were published in page 5. The first article was written in favour of journalist. The second article wrote about the broadcasting of false news. The writer stated that without investigating the sources or the fact, media sometimes give breaking news in a hurry which misleads people. The third article stated that media of Assam is destroying the Assamese language. While busy with TRP race they broadcast only the violent issues, corruptions, private life of high profile persons, romance etc. In the fourth article the writer mentioned the statement of Padmashree Rajdeep Sardesai, who said that today's media have lost its credibility. He said that it is seen that

in many times media act as a police or judge of a court. Some owner used media more for political and financial benefit than the society's benefit. The writer mentioned the 'paid news' syndrome. The writer stated that like Doordarshan private media is not socially responsible. The writer wrote the verdict of the Supreme Court in February, 1995 regarding air wave and also wrote the statement of the parliamentary standing committee regarding TRP.

On 19th October, 2015 in *Asomiya Pratidin* a letter was published where the writer mentioned the talk shows or the panel discussions broadcast by the regional channels. He mentioned that in most of the cases the panelists were debating and diverts from the actual point and in most cases anchors of Assam failed to control the situation. He said that people have more trust on the anchor person, so one should play a strong role.

On 7th April, 2016 in *Aamar Asom* an article was published regarding the Assam Assembly Election, Media and Facebook, where the writer wrote the role played by the local satellite channels regarding state election, 2016. He questioned the exit poll of different media channels. According to him some channels showed the exit poll according to their owners' political agenda. But the write gives credit to social media for creating political awareness among young people.

On 9th April, 2016 in *Amar Asom* an article was published which stated that a electronic media intentionally attacked a retired professor because the person addressed a press conference before the election and appealed the masses not to vote for BJP.

On 28th April, 2016 an article was published in the first page of *Aamar Asom* where the write wrote about the JNU incident and the role of media. He mentioned a term Newscook and stated that today young journalists should focus on the actual incident while reporting. In the same newspaper, in an article the writer appealed to every media to raise awareness to protect themselves from the foreigners. He mentioned that during Assam Agitation (1979-1985) media of Assam had played an active role. He said that it is expected that now media is not neutral. But the writers appealed to all the reporters of Assam to take up the cause of responsible journalism. The journalist should think about the local indigenous peoples constitutional rights, should give more positive news, should be analytical and should create awareness among people to constitute a good people's government.

On 5th May, 2016 a column was published in *Aamar Asom* where the writer criticize the social media specifically the Facebook. He stated that while enjoying freedom of speech people writes unparliamentarily language and posts unethical comments. He advised Facebook authority to mandate some rules and regulation.

On 3rd January, 2016 an article was published in the editorial page of *Aamar Asom* where the writer wrote that regional satellite channels give more preference to crime and violence. He mentioned that regular watching of negative news would impact mental growth. He also mentioned about the use of language in the tickers used by the channels. He also mentioned that media trial is also an unfair practice of Assamese channels and they must avoid it.

On 2nd February, 2016 two articles were published in *Aamar Asom*. The first article titled "Light, Camera, Action!" stated that news of regional channels are not news. They create drama only. At the outset of the article the writer wrote that picture does not always speak the truth. The other article emphasizes on the competition seen among the regional satellite channels of Assam. For competition the news framing is different. He also mentioned that as the election dates of the state coming closer the character of electronic media of Assam is very clear. We can clearly identify which media house work for which party. According to the writer it is important to note that the television channels of Assam

should not act as a spoke person of different political parties. He also stated that if the control lies in the hands of politicians or corporate, the media cannot be the mouth piece of general public.

On 11th April, 2016 an article was published in *Aamar Asom* editorial page where the writer wrote that though media is the fourth pillar of democracy have the duty to publish the information about the other pillar, it is now seen that media itself has not done their duty. It is generally seen that people criticize the journalist but the writer wrote that it is the result of Rupert Murdoch's media policy. He criticizes the three models of Murdoch policy stating that the editorial board is now a salaried person loosing freedom, control of market by increasing shares and financial assistance from political leader or party. The writer mentioned that media has now become a company which concentrated profit making more than the ethics of the reporters. The writer gave examples of some national and international media houses. He said that importance of marketing manager is more than the editors and journalist, so media is not neutral and objective.

In 2nd May, 2016 in *Asomiya Pratidin* a letter was published where the writer said that as the number of newspaper increases, the language destroys. With less responsibility at the end of reporters, Assamese journalism is in a pathetic condition.

An article was published on 25th November, 2015 *Aamar Asom* where the writer wrote that there should be a limit of news broadcasting. Media should know how much time a news should be broadcast. He also stated that besides giving information media has the responsibility to educate the society. According to the writer media neglected the hills of Assam and BTAD area. Media fail to cover all the tribes and communities. He concluded by expecting that channels should self analyse to perform better role.

On 18th August, 2015 in *Aamar Asom* an article was published where the writer told about the violence created by the media. He gave examples where live coverage was done on moral policing. The writer wrote that media of Assam typically violates the Press Council of India and National Broadcasting Associations code of conduct. He also mentioned the legal provision of Indian law and condemned the media trial. The write wrote how electronic media affects the judgment of a case. He mentioned the statement of PCI's chairman and said that media is now under business people who only wants profit. He appealed to the Guwahati High Court itself to take the matter and give restriction to electronic media for broadcasting violent issues and also media trial.

On 6th September, 2015 in *Asomiya Pratidin* a news was published which headline is "News is replaced by noise and we are the judge, jury and prosecutor". It was a statement issued by Padmashree Rajdeep Sardesai on the occasion of the foundation day of a media institute. He mentioned that there are many major issues of the state like flood, corruption but national media only cover the sensational stories like Sheena Bora murder case. Journalists think themselves of as celebrities, who give judgment by sitting in the comfort of the studios. He stated that the news is now controlled by TRP.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, it may be commented that audience trust is at the core of media's survival in present day context. Moreover, audience feedback is equally important considering varied perceptions and other socio-economic factors of the target audience. Regional media especially should operate on audience expectations, taste and social values. Maintaining ethics in particular social context seems to be important for the media. Therefore, studies on media's credibility have become necessary so that trustworthiness on media is restored as well as media discipline is maintained for its own survival. In a state like Assam, media research pertaining to the incidents as stated above is a need of the hour.

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ANNEXURE: A FEW MEDIA CRITIQUE PRESENTED THROUGH MEDIA CLIPS



Figure 1

